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1917?

By
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PROLOGUE

Herewith is presented the first chapter of a fiction serial dealing with what might happen should European powers, after they had settled their own differences, wage war on the United States. The author, one of the best fiction writers in the country, has based his story upon a thorough understanding of military, naval and internal conditions in the United States and upon a sound knowledge of military and economic history. The story is not technical. It will hold your interest from the first line to the last, not alone through the rapid and vivid style of the story, but also because the author endeavors to show how helpless the United States would be in a state of unpreparedness.

CHAPTER I

The Scout Cruiser Salem.
THE United States scout cruiser Salem, Lieutenant Commander Walter Barrett, was steaming east in the North Atlantic as fast as her twin turbines could take her. On her trials, something over eight years before, they had proved twenty-five and nine-tenths knots an hour, but so earnestly was young Hamilton, the chief engineer, now forcing the engines that twenty-six knots and a trifle over registered on the dial before Barrett on the bridge, and every knot and every fraction of a knot on the course he was steering was upon the commander's own responsibility, in variance of his instructions and certain to lead to a court martial if he failed by the results of acting upon his own initiative to justify his act.

For Barrett's orders upon leaving Hampton Roads were to proceed at once to Haiti—indeed, he had on board and quartered in his own cabin the two gentlemen—Messrs. Banland and Gordon—who were to proceed as soon as possible to Port au Prince as personal representatives of the president at Washington to observe the course of the uprising and disorders in Haiti and Santo Domingo, yet for more than two days, at sea as he had after he

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was out of sight of shore, Barrett had been steering his course east and north at full speed day and night till now he was 1,500 miles out at sea and 1,000 miles farther away than when he started from his proper destination.

It was upon the morning of the celebration throughout the United States of a new triumph of the moral power of American diplomacy that Barrett cleared Hampton Roads. After turning Cape Henry his course immediately should have been laid south and east, but as he stood on the bridge staring out to sea farther and farther to the left he veered his ship. From out there ahead in the unwatched, unprotected sector of the north Atlantic between the Virginia capes and Spain approached the great battle fleet of the league. Barrett had no doubt whatever of that. Two thousand miles beyond the horizon it might be now; it might be twelve hours' steaming farther off; but that it approached the commander of the American cruiser was certain. Equally certain had been the other officers who had forgotten with him at the Army and Navy club the night before he sailed.

"It's no use talking any more about what the government ought to order us to do," one of the oldest and most revered of the officers said. "Now is the time for us to do something."

"What?" Barrett had asked.

"What you can do should be perfectly plain. We all know that the circumstances which seem most to reassure our government of the league's

intentions—that is, the simultaneous withdrawal of their powerful ships from the Caribbean—is not in compliance with our demands; it's simply in accord with their plan."

"Of an attack against us?"

"Precisely. Their high seas battle fleet has been gone from its home posts in Europe for several days. Officially the ships are somewhere in the Atlantic at maneuvers, which means that they've mobilized, ready for attack on us at signal."

"And the withdrawal of the cruisers from the Caribbean?"

"Means that the cruisers have gone to join the high-seas fleet, of course to aid in the attack on force."

"You feel that is sure, sir?"

The older officer referred to the others. "Who questions at now?"

No one questioned, so after putting to sea Barrett had steered his course to the east. The first day showed him nothing to stir him further, but at sunrise of the second day he had sighted a great biplane in the clouds. Instantly he flashed the news back to the shore by wireless. The official reply to him said that the presence of air craft could now be of no significance. What was the Salem doing in the position from which it signaled? The administration particularly desired the presence of Messrs. Banland and Gordon at Port au Prince as soon as possible.

Barrett, with the code communication in his hand, turned quietly to the quartermaster.

"Follow the plane as long as it is in sight, and when it disappears continue in its direction." He went himself to the telephone to the engine room.

"Can you give us any more, Mr. Hamilton?" he questioned the chief engineer.

"I'll try, sir."

Within the hour the biplane had disappeared, but it had remained in sight long enough to guide the Salem. During the remainder of the day the scout ship rushed east at full speed, and at night, with all ports covered and with the switches of the lighting circuits thrown out, Barrett had driven his ship on through the darkness. No light from another ship, no sound of another's engine, no smell of another's smoke had reached him or his lookouts during the night. Dawn had discovered to him only an empty sea, gray and rugged, obscured a little by mist. The day brought no other ship within the circle of the horizon, but now it was another dawn and now, as Barrett scanned the water, he saw a crate floating.

He passed it and came upon another crate with bright yellow bits—peeling of orange, they were—floating beside it. He looked to the other side—potatoes floating there. He was by them and now was passing bits of bread, vegetable tops, more potato parings and scraps of all sorts—the leavings from the plates of 10,000 men who had eaten their rations at the same hour, the foodstuffs from a fleet.

Lieutenant Commander Barrett set his helm hard to the right. When the Salem had cleared he ordered again formally to Hamilton to give "full speed ahead." He must have passed the approaching fleet a few miles off in the morning mist. Their course, as well as he could reckon from the scraps on the sea, was more to the south than he had expected. He had overrun them and now was in their pursuit.

Lieutenant Marston, the second in command, came quietly to the bridge, his revolver belt buckled about him.

"Mr. Banland and Mr. Gordon both seem to be asleep, sir. Shall I have them waked or shall I leave them as they are?"

"I was thinking about them," Barrett replied as evenly. "I'll see to them."

"Smoke ahead, sir," a lookout in the foretop yelled. "More to the left. Destroyers to the right and turning about."

"Aeroplanes approaching us, sir!" The hail came this time from the bow, and the sailor there was pointing up and ahead. Barrett shifted his glasses from the four vessels rushing toward him to the dim, soaring specks high above in the sky. They descended as they approached.

"They went up high at first to make sure we were alone," Barrett commented to Marston.

"Yes, sir. Looks like now they may try bomb attack."

"I think so," Barrett took pad and pencil from a pocket and wrote slowly and carefully:

"Large fleet sighted about 58.37 west, 83.42 north, steaming west apparently at about sixteen knots. We make out definitely thirty vessels, destroyers and a cruiser, accompanied by air craft, coming toward us."

He reread it and handed it to Marston. "Code that and have it sent at once." He gazed again at the aeroplanes and the destroyers and looked back at the engine room dial. It showed revolutions of the turbines which about twenty-six knots. The engine room crew could not be asked to do better, but for what they would be required to do Barrett believed they deserved a word of explanation. He stepped to the engine room telephone and spoke to the chief below:

"Three destroyers and a cruiser—apparently the Falcon or one of her class—are coming for us, Mr. Hamilton. I have just sent word that we have sighted a large fleet. We are going to try to pass the smaller vessels and get close as possible to make out the main fleet before we sink. If we are unable to signal to you after the action begins keep us full speed as long as you can."

"I understand, sir," Hamilton's voice replied.

The anti-air craft gun on the forward deck—it was a small quick firer with double telescopic sights—moved as the crew trained it upon the aeroplanes swooping down. The pointer looked back again to the bridge. The planes, which had passed far ahead of the destroyers and of the cruiser, were within extreme range.

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"They can kill us, but we've beaten them!"

"Tell those men they are not to fire under any circumstances until I tell them to; they must not even aim. We are not to start this."

The anti-air craft quick firer ceased to move. Barrett gazed back at the colors astern. Above him also, upon the foremost halyards, the stars and stripes showed plainly in the breeze. The other ships showed no emblem.

Only under the wings of the aeroplanes a device in the shape of a circle crossed with a bar was painted. The air craft had come close enough to make it plain. They were perhaps a thousand feet up and twice as far forward of the Salem, but Barrett's gaze abandoned them for the Falcon as some one who had been watching that vessel shouted.

For a spot of smoke, appearing suddenly, obscured the cruiser's forward gun shield, and 200 yards ahead of the Salem, and only slightly to the left of its course, a spur of spray dashed up from the sea; another spur, almost beside the Salem as the shell rocketed.

"They started it—without warning!" Marston cried.

Barrett stared, his eyes glowing, his lips tight pressed. A second sudden haze from the Falcon's forward gun dimmed its deck; a hundred yards closer to the Salem, but still a little to the left the shell shrieked into the sea.

"Fire!" Barrett cried. "Give it to them! Oh, give it to them!" He turned to Marston, restrained. "Code," The Falcon has fired upon us, and get it off quick!"

(To Be Continued.)

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